



Case Study Portfolio

Thimlich Ohinga

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MS 715 Interpretation in Museums and Heritage Organizations
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Travel Through Time

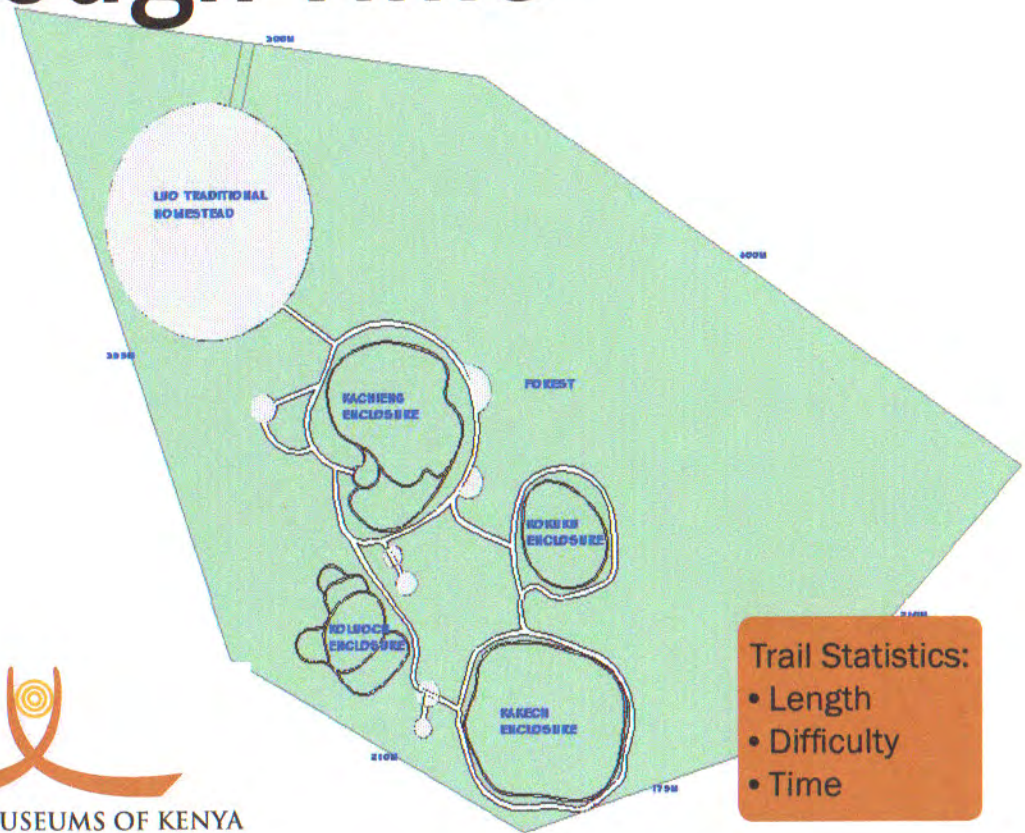
The walled enclosures you are about to explore have been in use for over 500 years. Migrating clans built the walls to define and claim their territory and to protect themselves from outside threats such as wildlife and other clans searching for land.

Take this trail on a journey through time to discover:

- How the walls were constructed
- Who constructed the walls
- How people lived within the walls
- How the forest relates to the site

Thimlich Ohinga

“High walls that are impossible to climb in a frightening dense forest”



Trail Statistics:

- Length
- Difficulty
- Time



NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF KENYA

WHERE HERITAGE LIVES ON

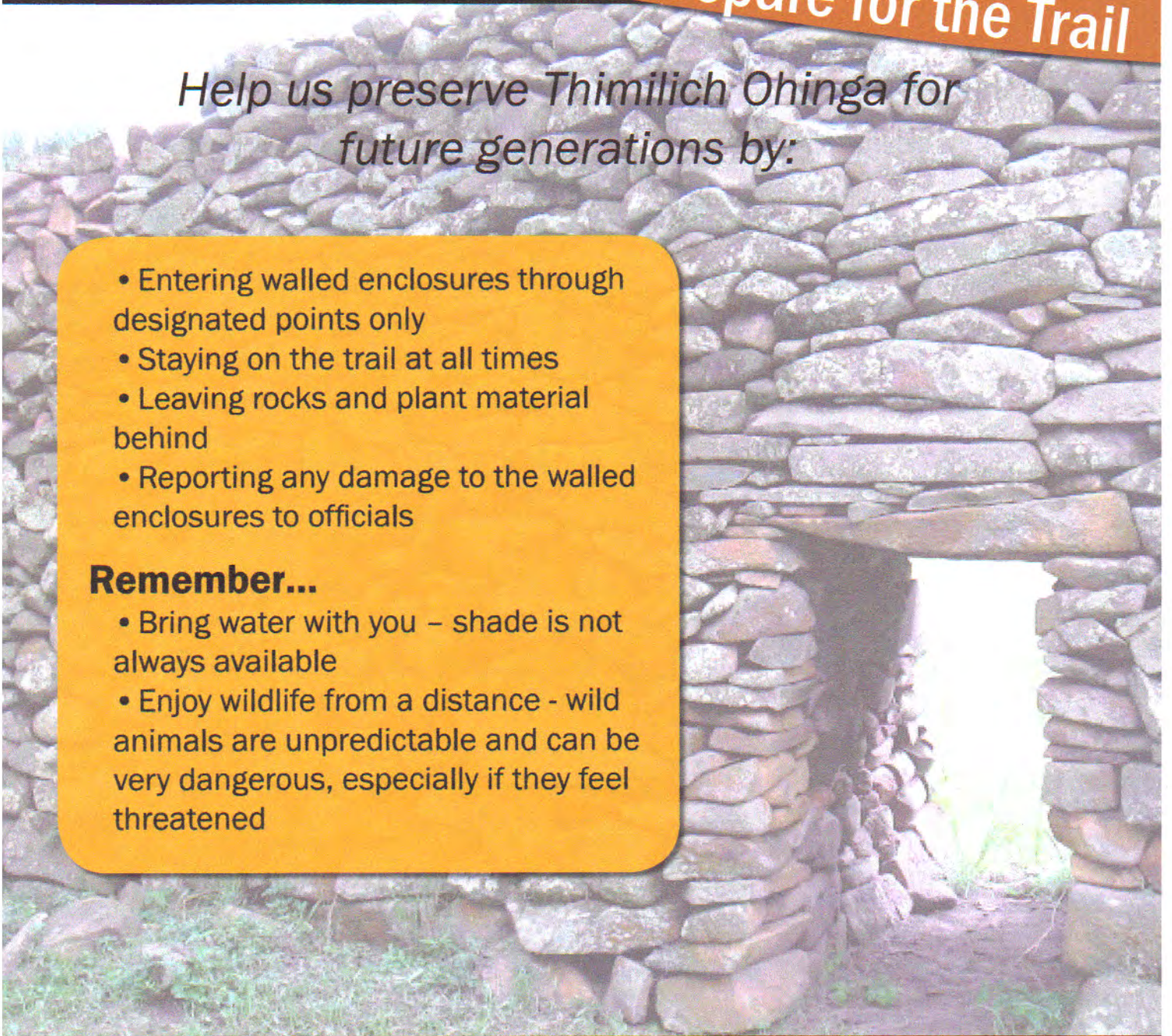
Prepare for the Trail

Help us preserve Thimilich Ohinga for future generations by:

- Entering walled enclosures through designated points only
- Staying on the trail at all times
- Leaving rocks and plant material behind
- Reporting any damage to the walled enclosures to officials

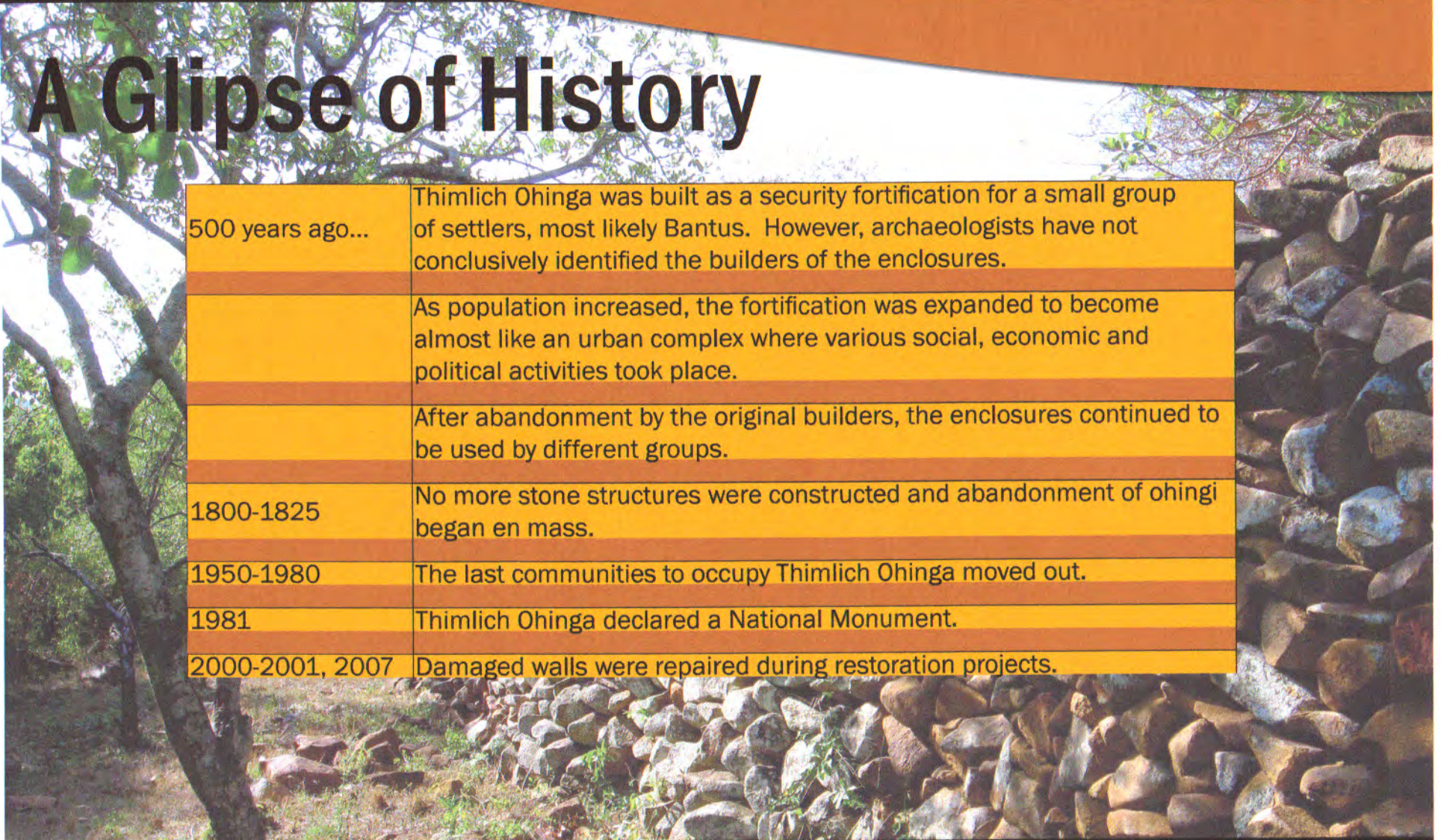
Remember...

- Bring water with you – shade is not always available
- Enjoy wildlife from a distance - wild animals are unpredictable and can be very dangerous, especially if they feel threatened



A Glimpse of History

500 years ago...	Thimlich Ohinga was built as a security fortification for a small group of settlers, most likely Bantus. However, archaeologists have not conclusively identified the builders of the enclosures.
	As population increased, the fortification was expanded to become almost like an urban complex where various social, economic and political activities took place.
	After abandonment by the original builders, the enclosures continued to be used by different groups.
1800-1825	No more stone structures were constructed and abandonment of ohingi began en mass.
1950-1980	The last communities to occupy Thimlich Ohinga moved out.
1981	Thimlich Ohinga declared a National Monument.
2000-2001, 2007	Damaged walls were repaired during restoration projects.



Impossible to Climb

In Luo, Ohinga (plural: Ohingi) means “high walls that are impossible to climb.” Some sections of the walls are more than four meters tall – that’s twice the height of an adult!

[Sketch of cross section of wall]

The walls have an outer and inner face of larger stones and a core of smaller stones. (Caption)

Look at the immense stone walls and try to imagine how they were constructed.

The original builders collected naturally occurring stones from the surrounding countryside. Without altering the shape of the stones or using mortar, community members carefully fitted the stones together, like pieces of a puzzle. Thimlich Ohinga is one of the few remaining examples of dry-stone architecture.

Both men and women helped to build the walls. Men were involved in the construction of the walls. Women gathered supplies and prepared food. It took an entire village to build these walls.

Welcome Home

You have just entered the Kachieng enclosure. In Luo, the prefix Ko or Ka means “belonging to” or “the home of.” This enclosure, therefore, was most recently the home of the Chieng family.

The organization of space within the enclosures closely resembles the layout of contemporary Luo homesteads. A typical Luo family lives in an enclosed place (pacho) with their livestock. As the number of people living in Thimlich Ohinga increased, additional enclosures were built close to one another and at times shared walls.

What role do you play in your family? Examine the figure on the right to determine where you would sleep if you lived in Thimlich Ohinga.

[Diagram of typical Luo homestead demarcating the first son's house, etc.]



A Frightening Dense Forest

"Thimlich" means "a frightening dense forest" in Luo.

The forest has long been considered a sacred place. Past residents laid their ancestors to rest in the forest. The current community harvests medicinal plants, used to treat various diseases and ailments, from the forest.

In the early 1990s the local community realized the forest was in danger of disappearing. Most of the trees had been cut down for fuel and many of the other plants were disappearing as well. In 1994, local community members established the Got Olasi Youth Farming and Tree Nursery Association. The Association monitors the forest, grows seedlings for the community and ultimately ensures that the forest is not overexploited and remains a resource available to the entire community.



The Candelabra Tree

*The Candelabra tree is beautiful,
but poisonous.*

Characteristics

Its unique shape inspired its Latin name: *Euphorbia candelabrum*. Candelabra are decorative candlesticks with multiple arms connected to a single column or pedestal. Branches on the tree grow from a single trunk, just like a candelabrum.

Habitat

Candelabra trees grow along the equator in the tropical regions of Africa. They thrive in a variety of environments – on plains and steep hillsides, in savannah grasslands and thorny bush-lands.

Poisonous Properties

The white sap is the most dangerous - it will blister your skin and burn your eyes. All parts of the tree are poisonous if eaten and handling any part of the tree may irritate your skin.



Watch for the Candelabra tree - If you see one, stay well clear!

You be the Archaeologist

Closely examine the ground around you. What unusual objects can you find? Can you guess what they are? How they were formed?

- Smooth stones – a result of shaping iron
- Pieces of tuyere – the tube through which air is blown into a furnace
- Slag – impurities separated from metals in metal ores

Together, all of these objects suggest that past inhabitants of Thimlich Ohinga used this area as a location for iron smelting, the process of producing workable iron from iron ore. Iron ore was heated in a furnace until the metal in the ore and the impurities in the ore separated.

Image of smooth stones

Image of tuyere pieces

Image of slag

A Constant Battle

Although Thimlich Ohinga has endured many centuries, the years have left their mark. Weather and human contact have caused sections of the walls to crumble. Vegetation, which grows quickly in this tropical climate, is taking root in the walls and gradually breaking them down.

Maintenance of the walls is a constant chore at Thimlich Ohinga. National Museums of Kenya staff and local community members remove troublesome vegetation and use traditional stone mason techniques to repair damaged sections of the walls.

As one of the few stone enclosures left in Kenya, Thimlich Ohinga is a unique window into the past that must be preserved. Who knows what aspects of Kenya's pre-colonial past will be illuminated based on evidence gathered here?

